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Comment

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Comment by the Editor

THE GENEALOGY OF A LEGEND

Leonard Brown of Des Moines wrote a poem entitled "Pash-a-pa-ho" in which he described the massacre of a band of Delaware Indians near Fort Des Moines and the terrible revenge of a Sauk and Fox war party on the Sioux. He said he copied the names from a day book which he had seen in 1857 in the possession of Benjamin Bryant, a fur trader who came to Des Moines in May, 1843. Perhaps Bryant told him the story. This version, said to be well known, was printed in a Polk County history in 1880.

Two years later, in his book on *The Red Men of Iowa*, A. R. Fulton credited the story to John Evans, a trader who claimed to have been with a large party of Sauk and Fox Indians encamped on the present site of Des Moines "about the year 1841". Evans related in vivid detail the circumstances of the massacre as told by the lone Delaware brave who escaped. The exact words of the chief were quoted: "We are all dead men. We will fight as long as we can." When Evans and two other traders, Thomas Connelly and James Ewing, visited the scene of the tragedy they found

four Sioux braves lying near the body of the mighty Neswage, apparently slain by his tomahawk, as if in verification of the Delaware's description.

This much of the story appears to be corroborated by the brief statement in Agent Beach's report in 1842 that a "small party of Pottawatomies and Delawares was destroyed toward the close of last year by a body of the Sioux." It seems strange, however, that he was not more impressed by a fight in which forty-nine Indians were killed. According to his account the massacre occurred south of the Neutral Ground, which implied that it was east of the Des Moines River. Moreover, he ignored completely the Sauk and Fox punitive expedition. Brown was apparently mistaken in dating the incident after Fort Des Moines was established in 1843.

Fulton's version of the great battle of the Sauk and Fox warriors with the Sioux has been often repeated, though it must have been based upon the boastful tales of the victorious Indians. Of course they took 300 scalps and lost only seven. No one has reported what the Sioux braves said in their war councils. There is no evidence in contemporary records to support the veracity of the traders and Indians.

Early settlers in Carroll, Ida, Sac, Webster, and

other counties found certain places along the streams and on the prairie strewn with bones and arrowheads, which they construed to be evidences of a recent Indian battle. Local tradition has associated these places with the alleged massacre of the Sioux in 1841. But all the bones may not have been human and the accumulation of arrowheads might indicate village sites. Furthermore, it seems improbable that so many Sauk and Fox Indians were in the vicinity of the Raccoon Fork in the fall of 1841, because they did not move their villages to that locality until after the treaty of 1842. By that time the presence of companies of dragoons at Council Bluffs, Fort Atkinson, and the Sauk and Fox agency must have curbed their belligerency. Maybe the battle was no more than wishful imagination.

J. E. B.